Oral History Number: 163-002
Interviewee: Sheldon Mills
Interviewer: Kim Taylor
Date of Interview: August 11, 1986
Project: Civilian Public Service Smokejumpers Oral History Project

Note: This interview takes place during a thunderstorm, so there is some unrelated background noise.

Kim Taylor: This is Kim Taylor interviewing Sheldon Mills for the Smokejumper Oral History Project at Camp Paxson at Seeley Lake, August 11, 1986. To start with, can you give us a brief biographical sketch?

Sheldon Mills: Yes, I was born in Douglas, North Dakota. From Douglas, North Dakota, after a while we moved to Michigan, and most of my life I was brought up in Michigan. I spent most of my life in Bellaire, Michigan. Then after I graduated from high school, I went to college. I went to Albion College, which was a Methodist college, and I studied to be a teacher. But about the time that I wanted to start teaching, along came World War Two. Then when World War Two came along, I decided that I was a conscientious objector [CO]. Then when I made that decision, I was finally drafted and went into a conscientious objector camp that was run by the Quakers, or the Friends. After going from one Quaker camp to another for a few months, I finally decided that I would volunteer to be a smokejumper. A camp that was run mostly by the Mennonites with the help of the Brethren and the Friends. I then became a smokejumper and was a smokejumper for the three years during World War Two.

KT: Did you have any trouble getting your 4-E status?

SM: Yes, I had a great deal of trouble getting my 4-E status simply because I did not come from a peace church. Because I did not come from a peace church and because the local draft board was not too sympathetic, I had to go before the draft board, have a hearing. I finally told the draft board I do not care to talk about this anymore. I will let you do one of two things as far as I'm concerned: either send me to prison or I will compromise and I will go to a conscientious objectors' camp. Well, then the authorities went into conference and they came out, and I guess they figured it would be cheaper for the government if I would be sent to a conscientious objectors' camp instead of to prison. That is how I got into a conscientious objectors' camp. If the same thing would happen again, I would do the same thing.

KT: What kind of project work did you start doing?

SM: Starting off in conscientious objectors' camp, I was located in Coshocton, Ohio, which is run by the Friends, and there we did a great deal of soil conservation work. We tested rainfall and we tested the soils, and that was the main thing. From Coshocton, Ohio, the Friends wanted to open a camp at Swallow Falls, Maryland, and I was picked to help open that camp. I was sent to Swallow Falls, Maryland, but after six weeks, I think the government thought that Swallow Falls, Maryland, was just a little bit too close to Washington, D. C., so they had the camp closed. I was
sent back to Elkton, Oregon. Then after I was...or I was sent back to Coshocton, Oregon [Ohio]. I got back to Coshocton, Oregon...Coshocton, Ohio, and after a month or two there was a chance to go to Elkton, Oregon, where they had the camp. I then transferred to Elkton, Oregon, and from Elkton, Oregon, it was not long before I was accepted as a smokejumper at Missoula, Montana.

KT: Okay, can you tell us a little bit about your first experiences as a smokejumper?

SM: I was really pleased, first, with the way camp was operated. The Mennonites that were chief runners of the camp were doing a wonderful job. One of the first experiences I can remember in jumping out of a plane was to have my chute light on top of a snag. Here I was dangling on top of a snag, but I had had enough training before that to know how to use a let-down rope and how to get down safely to the ground.

KT: Was that the only time that you landed in a tree?

SM: No, that was not the only time I landed in a tree. That was the only time I landed in a snag because in jumping on various fires, I found out that the nicest way to jump on a fire was to land in a tree and make a featherbed landing. Because very often the terrain that you would land on would be rocky—rocky and dangerous—but if you could light in a nice pine tree, it would let you down just about long enough where your feet would touch the ground. That would be a featherbed landing, and that was excellent. That’s what I would always try to do is to land in a tree.

KT: What was the training experience like?

SM: Because I had been a farm boy, the training experience was not too tough for me, but the Forest Service ran quite a rigorous training period where you would have to hike a lot in the woods. You’d have to cut a lot of wood. You’d have to cut down a lot of trees, and then they might set some controlled fires that you would have to put out. Probably the hardest part—most scary part of the training period as far as I’m concerned—was not jumping out of an airplane, but jumping off of the practice tower. You’d be suspended by a rope, and you would come landing up with your feet just a few feet off of the ground. That was more scary, really, than jumping out of an airplane. As far as the training in airplane jumps, when I went into an airplane I could never tell. Sometimes in making a parachute jump it would be just as easy as walking out of a room or out of your house—that easy. The next time maybe when you made a parachute jump it would be scary, and you would wonder, why in the world and I ever doing this anyway? You never could tell exactly what your feelings would be when you jumped—made a parachute jump.

KT: What were some of the people like that you worked with?

SM: The people that I worked with were wonderful. Forest Service personnel knew what they were doing, and all that I can say that they did a super job in these very tough times.

KT: Did you ever feel any animosity from them for being a CO?

SM: Not when they were on the job. When the Forest Service men...when you were under their

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control, as far as I was concerned, and under their supervision, they were very professional, and they treated you fine. Most of the Forest Service men would treat you fine even when you were off-duty. Some of the Forest Service men, of course, did not like to especially associate with us, maybe, outside of working hours. Generally speaking, I found that the Forest Service men and the people in around Missoula, Montana, had a very friendly, tolerant attitude towards conscientious objectors. We could go into Missoula or we could visit other places or churches around Missoula, and we were welcomed. We would often have visitors from Missoula that would come out to our base camps and talk to us and be very friendly with us. It made me feel very good about the West because the people in the West...my experiences in conscientious objectors’ camp...The people in the West had a very tolerant, friendly attitude towards conscientious objectors.

KT: What was your first fire like?

SM: My first fire was down by Moose Creek that I jumped on. As I left the plane, I wondered, why in the world and I doing this anyway. But I made a very good landing right close to the fire. It wasn’t a very big fire, and within a few hours we had the fire under control. Then we went on our hands and knees and felt over every inch of the land where the fire was to see, be sure that there wouldn’t be a hot coal left. Then after that, we hiked back to the ranger station.

KT: What was your most memorable fire experience?

SM: My most memorable fire experience was a fire down in Idaho in a place that they called Granite Ridge. At Granite Ridge, we landed in a little meadow that was on top of a steep ridge. We had to walk a long ways to this fire. We landed in the evening, we walked early in the morning, we got to the fire. We thought we had this fire contained, but just when we thought that we had the fire contained, the fire crowned. We had to move for our lives, and we were lucky. We got behind a great big rock that was probably be larger than most houses, and we just stayed behind that big rock and let the flames and everything else blow over us. This fire was so hard in such a remote place that they even had to drop in our drinking water where we could drink if we were to put out this fire because it would take about a half a day to go down and back to a little stream at the bottom of this steep cliff if we had to carry our water. This fire is a fire that we didn't control. It was a fire that got away from us.

KT: How did that make you feel?

SM: Every once in a while after that I began to wonder, why in the world did that fire get away from us. I’m sure today—I’ve talked to other people that were on that fire—if we had gotten to that fire as much as one half hour earlier or an hour earlier, we would have been able to contain that fire, but we were just an hour late.

KT: Were there ever any injuries on your crew?

SM: The worst injury that took place when I was at CPS happened to be to me. The injury that took place to me was an injury that I cannot remember for this reason. Only people tell me about it. I was crushed by a snag. It crushed in my head. I was unconscious for six days. I was in the hospital for six weeks. The people that rushed me out had to make a stretcher from poles and

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some old shirts. Carried me out to the nearest road, put me in a truck, and then from this truck they had to transport me all the way to Missoula, Montana, which was about 35 miles away, and take me to a hospital. Of course, I cannot remember that because anything that happened to me in those six days that I was unconscious. Of course, only because people told me what happened do I know what happened.

I was lucky to get to a nice hospital in Missoula, Montana. It was run by the Catholic organization. I can still remember the two doctors that saw that I kept alive. One was Dr. Bergen. The other was Dr. Blagen. One was a man, the other was a woman, but they kept me alive. They wired up my jaws. They wired up my teeth. I was laid up there in the hospital for six weeks. In camp, I was very fortunate, too, because on the way to this hospital in just an ordinary vehicle we had a very good nurse at camp. Cathy...She’s now called Cathy Crocker was the nurse. When I got to Missoula, she made sure that I was well taken care of in this hospital. I guess I recovered pretty much from that accident except I can’t open my mouth too wide, which you would hardly believe if you listen to this tape, but I can’t open it too wide.

Another thing is they had to shoot me full of penicillin and other drugs that I’m not sure, but from that time on, I’ve been allergic to penicillin. I cannot use that as an antibiotic. I’m a person that has to use practically no salt in his diet. I guess that’s about the worst one.

KT: How did that make you feel about smokejumping after you got injured?

SM: Strangely enough, I was anxious to get back and jump. Consequently, here I was, finally, after being in the hospital for six weeks with this—head crushed in and brain concussion and all that stuff—when I got out, I was anxious to jump. So I made believe that I was stronger than I was. The reason that I got discharged from the hospital is because with no permission, I went outside and then when the people were around, I would kind of make believe...tried to chin myself and do pushup exercises and things like that. Pretty soon, I guess, they..."Oh, oh, that guy’s too dangerous to keep in a hospital. We’d better discharge him." So they discharged me. Then after I got discharged, then I kept on working and always tried to make believe I was stronger than I was.

Then I had to make a jump after that to see if I was in condition and as we went up to take this jump, I told the person in front of me, "Let me jump first because I can then ride the steps of the plane and I will have enough strength to jump, but if I jump after you maybe I won’t be able to get out of the plane in time." This guy shifted his place, let me go first, and luckily enough, I just let the parachute drift down to the ground and I made a nice landing.

KT: How did you feel jumping back out of the plane?

SM: Didn’t bother me a bit. Strangely, it didn’t bother me. I was glad to be able to do that. After that, I jumped on other fires from then. It made me feel good to be back jumping.

KT: Did you work...do any project work during the winter times?

SM: Oh, yes! One project work we do a great deal would be to, of course, cut a lot of firewood. We’d also go out in the woods and cut down a lot of snags so there you’d have less fire danger if
the lightning would strike. Sometimes, in some areas, we went out and built some bridges across some of the places that would help people get into the back country. We did some nursery work—taking care of some trees. That would be about the main project work that I did when I was in the smokejumpers.

KT: Which did you like best?

SM: Of the camps?

KT: Of the project work.

SM: Oh, I think building bridges was probably the most exciting.

KT: Where were you based out of when you were a smokejumper?

SM: Would be two main places where I based most of the time. Well, let’s say three main places. It would either Moose Creek, which is a very isolated place in Idaho. The nearest road into Moose Creek, where we would be based, was 25 miles. That’s the closest you could get a car in there. If you went into Moose Creek, you would either walk or you’d go in by airplane. Then I was stationed at Nine Mile a lot. After my injury, I was stationed, also, quite a bit of the time right in Missoula. Those would be the main places.

KT: Were you doing some work while you were recuperating from your injury?

SM: Yes, they let me work around the parachute lofts and help with different things around that, of that area, but I tried to get back into the parachute business just as quick as I could.

KT: What did your friends and family think about smokejumping?

SM: I always wrote glowing reports about smokejumping. I was proud to be a smokejumper. It made me feel so awfully good that the people around Missoula, Montana, accepted smokejumpers, and I also liked it very much that many of the nice girls in Missoula would come out and visit us in our camps. I have a very positive feeling about smokejumping and about the community of Missoula.

KT: What was the crew morale like?

SM: The crew morale. The crews that I would be in the morale would be very high, very good, very good compared to other CPS camps that I had been in. Crew morale very high, except morale in the camp fell off as soon as World War Two was over and we continued to be held. Were not released from camp, and people didn’t know when they were going to go home. Then the paratroopers from the army—many of them came in and would take over what we had been doing, and we would be moved to other camps in other states. We didn’t know just exactly how long the government would hold us and then release us, because the government held us a long while after they had released military personnel.
KT: Did you have thoughts about continuing with smokejumping?

SM: My main thought was...Well, I had fallen in love with a girl. My main thoughts was to get home as quick as I could and get married. I would have liked to stay, but I was moved out of the smokejumpers to a camp called Gatlinburg in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It was run by the Quakers for a while, but then the Quakers moved out and then it was run strictly by the government. The government, really in my experience, did not know how to handle conscientious objectors and did not do nearly a good a job running the camp as what the Quakers or the Mennonites done when they were in charge of the camps. From Gatlinburg, Tennessee, finally I was released and went home to Blair, Michigan, became a schoolteacher, taught for 34 years, retired. But still after being retired for about six years, I substitute teach almost all the time. I have very fond memories of Missoula and the way the smokejumpers were treated during World War Two.

KT: Do you remember any of the packouts?

SM: The packouts. This would be an interesting thing. In packouts, it's simply this. We'd be jumping on a fire. That was easy. About the time the fire started, a bunch of mules would be sent in to pick up our equipment after the fire was over. After the fire was out, then we would walk. Put our equipment by the side of the trail, walk down the trail, and that was wonderful except that you got so tired of walking downhill out of a fire that your feet began to ache. [laughs] But this was just simply wonderful, usually—the walk out of a fire.

KT: Do you feel like there's something that being a smokejumper has given you now?

SM: Well, I'm glad that I had the experience. Although I'm not a Mennonite, it makes me feel very good about many of our different churches simply because in the smokejumpers and in CPS, what we had, we had people of 57 different varieties of religion. They were in CPS for a common reason, and it made a person realize how wonderful other people are rather than people that believe just exactly like you may believe.

KT: Are there any other fire experiences or smokejumping stories that you can remember?

SM: I could remember so many of them that I'm not going to narrate them, but I'm going to tell you that one experience that's not too pleasant after getting released from conscientious objectors camp. I became a teacher in Michigan. After I'd taught for a few years, I had to have my certificate renewed. Then I found out it was very hard to get my certificate renewed. I was called before the big educational board. They said, "Why should we renew your certificate? You were a conscientious objector."

I didn't know whether they would renew that certificate or not. I finally told them, "If you don't renew my certificate, I will take the case before the American Civil Liberties Union and let them handle it." Within a few months, I got word back that they would renew my certificate.

KT: Was there any other time where you felt a prejudice for having been a CO?

SM: It might have hurt me somewhat if I had attempted to be a principal or a superintendent in a

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school, but as far as being just a teacher in a school, I didn't know whether it did or not. Of course, in my case, and you take the case of a CO, according to statistics, only one person in 1,000 took the position that I took. So you could see why...But I've had...In schools, I've worked right along with people out of the army that have been very, very friendly and have understood my position very well.

KT: What do you think about the way the smokejumper unit's run today?

SM: Well, the best that I can tell, now, is that they are finding out that they better continue using parachutes. For a while, they thought maybe all the smokejumping could go into using helicopters and so forth in putting out fires. They found out that there's a limit to what the helicopter can do. You have more and more people that continue to be smokejumpers and even what makes me feel good, they're letting some women jump. That's very good. Also, I've gone through their equipment, and their equipment today, of course, is much safer than it was at the time that I was a smokejumper. It's more maneuverable. It's just better. In some of the places that you have here in the West, I don't see how you could ever get along without them, unless you go into putting out fires simply by airplane and by some kind of chemicals and so forth. I think you'll have smokejumpers for a long while.

KT: Did you have any other comments that you'd like to make?

SM: I guess I'll have to repeat it again. A wonderful place to be. Two, a very wonderful person here that has interviewed me. A person here that knows how to take pictures, and it has been just wonderful to be around.

KT: [laughs] We'd like to thank you for the interview.

SM: You're welcome.

[End of Interview]